

WINTER DISCOVERY WALK

Get outdoors this winter with eyes wide open!



Spending time in nature has been proven to improve both physical and mental well-being. Getting outdoors to explore nature—whether in a forest or a more urban environment—can lower stress, improve attention span and brighten our mood. And, winter offers its own special rewards. Getting outside on a sunny day and breathing in the crisp, refreshing air can help boost our energy and provide a valuable dose of Vitamin D. Plus, there is a LOT to see in winter! With fewer leaves on the trees and fresh snow on the ground, winter makes it easier to spot animal tracks, buds, cones, and other more subtle signs of life that often go unnoticed in warmer months. So, it's time to layer up, don your boots, hat and mittens, and get outside for a winter scavenger hunt!

“Our identity includes our natural world, how we move through it, how we interact with it, and how it sustains us.”—David Suzuki

Before you go out, be prepared.



Consider bringing a camera or smartphone and/or a notebook and pencil to record your observations and any questions you might want to follow up on. And don't forget to bring along a snack or two, some water, and a hot thermos! Also consider investing in winter hiking boots and trekking poles if you are planning a more challenging walk. And remember to protect yourself from the sun – even in winter the sun's UV rays can be harmful, especially more so when reflecting off of white snow!

“What good is the warmth of summer, without the cold of winter to give it sweetness.”—John Steinbeck

First, there are the EASY FINDS—the cone-bearing evergreens.



Eastern white pine: usually the tallest conifer with lopsided branches and soft, fluffy 5-needle bundles (fun fact: this tree is the only 5-needle pine in eastern North America)

White spruce: has short 4-sided needles that roll between your fingers and have pungent odour when crushed; lower branches often droop close to the ground (fun fact: its drooping “skirt” is an excellent shelter for small animals!)

Balsam fir: has prominent resin blisters/bubbles on the trunk and flat, soft single needles attached directly to the twig (fun fact: amber jewellery can be crafted from fossilized resin of this tree!)

Eastern white cedar: has flat, overlapping scale-like leaves with a distinctive smell and small cones (fun fact: this tree is not a true cedar but is actually a member of the Cypress family!)

Tamarack: has bare branches because it is a deciduous conifer that loses all of its needles all at once in late fall unlike other conifers that shed and replace needles all year long (fun fact: the tamarack is a living fossil and is the odd tree out in the evolution of deciduous and coniferous trees!)

No cones but is prickly or has cedar-like leaves and blue berries? Probably a type of juniper (fun fact: the berries are its cones and some kinds like those of the common juniper, are used to make gin!).

See below for the silhouettes of these trees. For other features to help with identification, check out ACER's [Trees In Winter ID Cards!](#)



Eastern White Pine



White Spruce



Balsam Fir



Tamarack



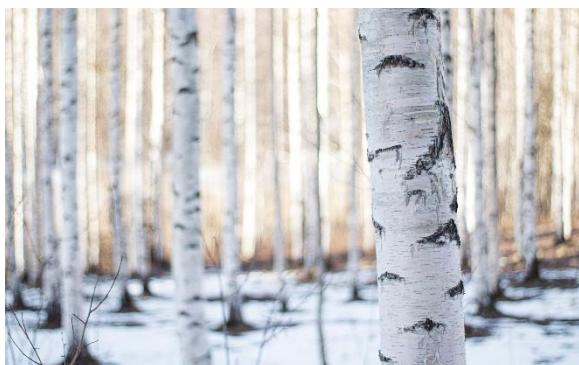
Eastern White Cedar



Eastern Red Cedar

“Take me deep into the wintry woods where hope glitters freshly worn.”—Angie Weiland Crosby

Then there are the deciduous trees and shrubs.



Squirrels or other small animals might be running toward the dripping bundles of keys hanging from opposite branches of the Manitoba maple, the only maple that retains its keys in winter! White birches have those black eyebrows that march up the tree and bark often with a peeling complexion! You might also spy the red berries of the Highbush cranberry (which are not true cranberries but are still edible), if the goldfinches and other winter birds have left any! Then there are the red branches of

the Red osier dogwood which add brightness to the bleakness of a cold, grey day and are often found in decorative winter planters, along with birch and cedar branches!

“Winter is a celebration of nature’s quiet beauty.”—Unknown

Then look **DOWN** to check what's poking out of the snow.



Many plants leave their skeletons with seed pods behind for you to find them in winter. Thistles with their prickles, goldenrods with bulging galls on their stems, Queen Anne's lace with their birds-nest tops, and wild mustard with its see-through seed pods, some looking like mini Christmas trees! Burdock burrs and beggar-tick seeds might find your woolly mittens and hat! You might also spot mullein with its tall spears of loaded seed heads, so loved by winter birds, or milkweed with its empty seed

pods that remind us of the monarchs that have flown south. And, in ditches, look for the cigar-shaped seed heads of the cattail, a plant increasingly threatened by aggressive invasive Phragmites with its large and dense seed head flags, and teasels with their prickly tops that were once used to tease wool to a soft finish.

“Winter is a season of recovery and preparation.”—Paul Theroux

Finally, look even **LOWER** for tracks of wildlife still active in winter.



The three-toed triangular tracks of birds are perhaps the easiest to spot, but see if you can spot these tracks also:

Deer and caribou: two-toed tracks.

Squirrels and mice: tracks with 4 front toes and 5 back toes.

Raccoons: five-toed side-by-side tracks with the front pair looking like tiny hands!

Rabbits: a bunny “trail” with smaller 4-toed tracks in front and

larger, longer rear tracks in behind.

Hares: their large hind feet land in front of their smaller front feet, often creating a "Y" or "!!" shape.

Coyotes: tracks are more of an oval shape compared to those of dogs, and have visible claw marks.

Other tips—deer and caribou, and canines and felines of all sizes, make tracks in straight lines while wide-bottomed animals like the porcupine and raccoon tend to waddle leaving tracks in plough-like lines!

Check [here](#) for a great resource from the Farmer's Almanac to help with identifying other tracks!



“What fire could ever equal the sunshine of a winter’s day?”—Henry David Thoreau

As you walk in the forest, enjoy the stillness.

In winter, nature appears to pause. Growth slows. Movement becomes intentional. Energy is conserved,



redirected, and stored. In forests, animals adjust their rhythms, from speed and abundant movement to endurance and patience, and trees, having lost their foliage, are quieter in the wind. This stillness offers a reminder to us that rest and reflection has value. It also heightens our awareness of our surroundings and encourages quiet reflection. However, in our warming world, this stillness is changing. Once a dependable lull in nature, winter is now less predictable, with shortening seasons, changing snow cover, and more frequent freeze-thaw cycles affecting both natural rhythms and the stillness we all cherish.

“I pray this winter be gentle and kind—a season of rest from the wheel of the mind.”—John Geddes

And, don’t forget to marvel at the ART of the snowflake!



Snowflakes, the delicate symbols of winter, form when cold water droplets freeze around dust or pollen particles, creating six-sided ice crystals that grow as they fall. Their perfect symmetry comes from the molecular structure of water—two hydrogen and one oxygen atom forming stable hexagonal patterns through hydrogen bonding. This same chemistry explains why ice floats, allowing aquatic life to survive beneath frozen lakes and driving vital spring water mixing. The size and

shape of snowflakes depend on temperature, humidity, and how quickly they form, while geography—altitude, latitude, and nearby lakes—determines when and where snow falls. Each snowflake is a tiny masterpiece of science, climate, and art. Next time it snows, step outside with a dark cloth and magnifying glass to discover the beauty of nature’s frozen art for yourself! And, if you want to read more about the science behind the ART of the snowflake, check out ACER’s blog post [here!](#)

“It is the life of the crystal, the architect of the flake, the fire of the frost, the soul of the sunbeam. This crisp winter air is full of it.”—John Burroughs

Wishing you a wonderful, wintry winter from the ACER team!

For additional ACER Discovery Walks, please visit our [Exploring the Outdoors](#) Resource Collection!